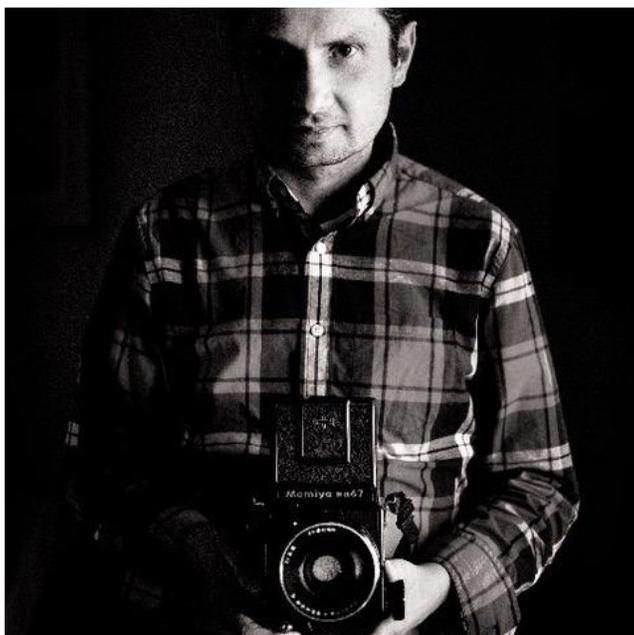


FUJILOVE

CREATIVE
STREET
PHOTOGRAPHY

20 TIPS BY OLAF SZTABA



OLAFSZTABA

Olaf first picked up a camera thirty-five years ago (see the photo above). Since then his passion for 'seeing' has become a lifetime journey with photography.

Widely known as a visual poet, Olaf's unique eye and relentless pursuit of visual simplicity allows him to capture "superbly creative and aesthetically pleasing images". The images, along with his writings, can be found at www.olafphotoblog.com. Discussions on seeing, creativity, inspiration, street and fine art photography accompany the images.

Olaf is the founder of Simplicity-In-Seeing, a subscription-based educational and mentoring platform dedicated to the craft of seeing. He is a columnist for the FujiLove magazine and contributes to numerous online and print media.

Olaf spends most of his time photographing in the field and writing about the results, usually exploring the side streets in big cities. He is a sought-after speaker and educator, leading photography workshops around the world. He is currently working on a series of books about creativity and his personal approach to image creation.

Olaf lives in Coquitlam, British Columbia with his wife Kasia, his son Olivier and their furry four-legged companion, Bailey.



1 OBSERVATION AND CONCENTRATION

We are all excited to hit the streets with our camera in pursuit of our passion. However, one of the most important prerequisites for capturing stunning and creative imagery is concentration and observation. Elliott Erwitt said: “To me, photography is an art of observation. It’s about finding something interesting in an ordinary place...I’ve found it has little to do with the things you see and everything to do with the way you see them.”

In other words, deep, photographic concentration leads to a state of awareness and attentiveness that is different from what we are used to in our daily lives. Such an acute perception allows us to scan the environment without applying the usual filters. It is not easy so we need to train our senses to notice every pocket of light, a passer-by on the other side of the street, a reflection in the window, the colour of a mailbox...every visual without exception.



2 BE CURIOUS AND PLAYFUL

When working with adults, I often observe certain patterns of behaviour which limit curiosity and playfulness. In approaching creative photography, it is worth reminding ourselves of the time when we were children. You remember when you had to wait in the doctor's office for hours and there was no internet. It was hard to sit still. Most of us would become curious about our surroundings, wriggling in the chair, checking stuff on the floor, staring at the ceiling, scanning the surface under the chair. In other words, as kids we were so curious about our environment that we didn't filter any visuals.



3 LOOK FOR AN UNCOMMON PERSPECTIVE

One of the most important aspects of photography is to show the world in our own way. In other words, we want to present our perspective and unique way of looking at our surroundings. One of the most powerful ways to do that is to seek a new perspective.

This photo was taken in Krakow, Poland during a short stroll around the city. When walking along a side street, I approached a set of stairs leading up to the main street. In the middle of the stairs, I looked up and noticed this unusual perspective.

The church on the left, although grand and prominent, had become a miniature structure. In contrast, the street lights were dominating giants. Then two men were walking side by side creating a strange silhouette as if they were one. This low perspective allowed me to use the blank sky as a white canvas underlying all the essential elements.

When photographing your subject, never settle for the usual perspective. Make sure to explore all possible options by walking around your subject, or lowering or raising your camera. Check if you can climb any structure nearby and revisit the scene. One of the most creative photographers, Andre Kartzes, said, "I just walk around, observing the subject from various angles until the picture elements arrange themselves into a composition that pleases my eye."



4 MAKE LIGHT YOUR SUBJECT

One of the most common dilemmas in photography, professional or not, is the difficulty of finding the right subject. When shooting on the street, a photographer can be overwhelmed by the many elements, actions, sounds, colours or even smells. We are in a visually-appealing location but somehow we find it difficult to start the seeing process.

One of the most powerful ways to start seeing while shooting on the street is to focus on light! What I mean by that is to start your 'seeing process' making the light your only subject!

An ideal day would be partially sunny or just plain sunny. Those of you who shoot in big cities or small towns may have the entire day for this exploration. When venturing out with your camera, the objective should be to look for the light only! Forget about people, streets or other elements – just observe light. Look for some spots on the street with unusual lighting conditions, pockets of light or even bounced light. Start from there!



5 NEVER TAKE AN IMAGE WITHOUT PLAYING WITH THE EXPOSURE COMPENSATION DIAL (EV)

Despite its fancy name, the concept of the exposure compensation dial is very simple. In other words, by turning the dial you can darken or brighten your image. One of the advantages of the Fujifilm X Series cameras is that they all have an electronic viewfinder so you can see the changes in your viewfinder before you take an image. Some people say, “Yes, but I can also do it in post-processing.” True, but the reason I urge my students to play with the exposure compensation dial is because underexposing or overexposing your image may change your idea of the photo entirely. Not only does the composition change but the way you arrange some elements may also differ quite substantially.

It is especially true with contrasting light. Underexposing some areas of the image may mean it turns black, thus hiding some elements from plain sight and simplifying the image. Don’t be afraid to go all the way while using the exposure compensation dial – you will be amazed by the magic this method can produce.

Finally, keep in mind that underexposure or overexposure is not possible with our own sight. With time, you can learn to imagine the change, but we as humans are not able to do that.



6 FIND A GREAT STAGE

When talking to photographers one question often comes up: “How can I identify a scene worth exploring visually?” It is especially true for street and travel photography as the abundance of elements change quickly, making it difficult to focus on one scene.

One of the methods I use is the concept of a stage. The starting point is to think of an image as a theatre. You have a stage with many different elements on it. For example, it could be a play that takes place in a living room. You would probably have a table, some chairs, furniture – elements that do not move. Then, you would have actors who do move around.

Apply this concept directly to photography. Instead of chasing your subject around the city, design your photograph and wait for the subject to walk in. Not only will you have creative control over your frame, but your image will have stunning visuals.



7 PREVIEW IN BLACK AND WHITE

When shooting on the street, I sometimes set my preview to black and white film simulation (ACROS +R) - black and white with extreme contrast. This way, instead of worrying about every detail, shade or colour in the frame, you will be able to see large black and white areas. Arranging shapes in the frame is much easier than dealing with every detail, at least for a beginner photographer.

There is one more reason I use this technique: deep blacks and distinctive white areas, if arranged cleverly, generally provide clean, strong visuals.



8 CREATE TENSION IN YOUR IMAGERY

One way to break through the wall of visual indifference is to design images so that the viewer cannot decipher the image right away. One of the techniques to inject tension into your image is to create a white space in the frame by overblowing the highlights. The vast white space, which blends into the frame or white pages of the computer screen, confuses viewers and forces them to stay with the image and re-examine it.



9 DON'T CLUTTER YOUR FRAME

Looking at many photographs, you might conclude that the role of a photographer is to fill the frame with as many elements as possible. This is the most common mistake, which leads to poorly-composed imagery and a confusing narrative. Think of the frame as an empty canvas. The objective is NOT to fill the frame but to add a minimum number of elements in order to create a striking narrative.

The other way to consider your frame is to think like a painter. A painter starts with a white canvas and adds elements to it. Similarly, in photography, if you can find or create large black or white areas, then all you need to do is add elements to it. This way of crafting the image is much easier and more productive than trying to simplify a busy city scene. Try to build up, not pare down.



10 EMBRACE THE EMOTIONAL ROLLER-COASTER

There is a misconception that professional, established photographers have no doubts or ever lack confidence. There's nothing further from the truth. We all suffer from occasional periods of self-doubt and 'not-seeing'.

Such periods are normal but lead us to new visual discoveries and a renewed focus. One school of thought suggests forcing yourself to photograph during these periods. I suggest otherwise. Being a photographer does not always mean running around with your camera. The craft of seeing requires a much broader approach. Picking up your favourite magazine, or visiting the local gallery or design museum could be all that is needed for you to come back with a new attitude and fresh visual ideas.



11 APPROACH POST-PROCESSING AS IF YOU WERE 'SEEING WITH NEW EYES'

Many photographers transfer their imagery to the computer and view the imagery as a complete and final visual. I try to look at my images the same way I would approach a scene on the street. In other words, I examine every element in my photograph and attempt to 'capture a new image'. Of course, at this point it is impossible to re-arrange the elements in the frame but there is the possibility of cropping. For the sake of the visual exercise, I urge my students to stop worrying about pixels but crop as much as required. In this way you train your eye to extract only the necessary elements in the frame and avoid unnecessary clutter. Furthermore, this exercise leads to new visual ideas which could result in new ways of seeing and framing next time you are on the street.



12 BE A MYSTERY WRITER

A common issue plaguing images today is the lack of mystery. There is a misconception, especially among novice students, that photography means capturing what is front of you. You may try to arrange elements in the frame, you may pay attention to light or you may have a great subject but somehow the final image doesn't grab viewers' attention. It's because there is nothing to explore, nothing to guess at. There's nothing left for interpretation.

When creating the image, you don't need to put the entire subject or scene on display. Although it seems counterintuitive, consider leaving out some elements which initially appeared to be an important part of the image. In most cases this framing results in a more powerful image which forces the viewer to stay, explore and wonder. I believe that a great photograph is a mystery bestowed upon the viewer.



13 TAKE VISUAL RISKS

When presented with any visual we immediately try to find meaning and order in everything we see. It's the same when we are shooting on the street – our instinct pushes us to frame in a highly organised and rational way. But this is the greatest obstacle to visual experimentation.

One way to go beyond your comfort zone is to start breaking down all the elements into meaningless pieces. For example, what you see on the right of the frame is part of a window (naturally my eyes wanted to see the entire frame!). Then I had to balance the right side of the frame with some elements on the left. Once again, instead of going for the entire window I decided to capture just a hint of the window – enough to match the grey tonality. The yellow lamp breaks the visual uniformity.

Visual risk-taking is the mindset of approaching a scene from a highly unnatural perspective. This approach is extremely challenging because your brain pushes back, looking for customary connections. You must not give up but instead find a new visual link.



14 OUTSOURCE TECHNICALS TO YOUR CAMERA BUT BE AWARE OF THEM

Many people believe that shooting in AUTO mode is only for amateurs who don't know how to use their camera. From a technical perspective, it doesn't matter to me how the photo was taken. I am only interested in the image.

In fact, many photographers are so fixated on technical considerations that the bulk of the process of crafting the image is kidnapped by technical issues. They overthink the F-stop, shutter speed and a plethora of other considerations. It's especially common among starting photographers.

The X Series cameras are so sophisticated and smart that using the AUTO settings for most images frees your attention and allows the photographer to focus 100% on visuals. Of course, there should be a final check before pressing the shutter button to make sure the camera choices align with your artistic vision.



15 DON'T LIMIT YOURSELF

Many photographers pick their genre early in their photographic journey and work on building their vision from there. There is a common belief that the sooner you specialise, the better for you. I view it as a major mistake. That approach will not only cripple your creativity and seeing but also prevent new visual discoveries.

A much more productive approach is to focus on the mechanics of seeing, and the way you craft your images and present them to your audience. Shooting different genres or, even better, combining them into one photograph will expand your creativity and seeing horizons.

For example, doing street photography in the countryside allows you to implement landscape elements into your storytelling.



16 SHOOT A LOT? NO!

A common piece of advice is: “Go out and shoot as many photos as you can.” This suggestion, while genuine, makes sense on the surface. After all, in order to get better, you need to practice. Unfortunately, many photographers, especially those who have just started on their road to seeing, take this advice literally.

This approach creates a certain pattern in your brain: “If I am out shooting, I must take many images to practice and get better.” If you follow this logic, then not taking photos must be bad. This thinking often leads to skipping many steps in the seeing process that are required for taking a great image.

By following this logic, many become numb to the idea of selectivity and good judgment – the key ingredients of good photographic practice.

Instead of taking a lot of photos, start walking around observing the scene from all angles, sometimes looking through the viewfinder without pressing the shutter button. Learn to observe every pocket of light, movement, shape, colour, pattern or even noise around you. This selective approach will allow you to train your eye for excellence. Concentrate and observe, craft your imagery in your head but press the shutter button only when you are confident everything is in place for a great image. Avoid the mentality of “the more I take, the better chance I get it”.



17 SLOW DOWN AND BE PRESENT

One of the advantages of working with a small, light camera like the X100F is that you can spend more time walking and exploring the city. Having said that, many online videos advise that street photography requires a photographer to run around the city to search for the subject. This hurried approach may work for some but I would like to suggest another method.

A much better way is to find a small intersection, park or plaza and spend a considerable amount of time (2-3 hours) in this one location. Keep in mind that in large, busy cities such places will provide you with many subjects walking in and out of your location. By knowing your location, its geometry and interaction with light, you will be in a good position to craft stunning imagery.



18 DON'T BREAK THE RULES UNTIL YOU MASTER THEM
In his excellent book, “The Art of Photography,” Bruce Barnbaum defines composition as “*an arrangement of the parts of a work of art so as to form a unified, harmonious whole.*” Sounds simple. In contrast to popular belief, creating a strong composition is not straightforward. It requires concentration, visual proficiency and, most importantly, dedication.

One way to think about composition is to arrange shapes from disparate elements but without looking at the final template. It is incredibly difficult to learn composition and the arrangement of elements in the frame when shooting in visually busy places.



19 SHOOT WITH ONE FOCAL LENGTH

Here's some very important advice that will help your seeing. For almost a year I have been shooting exclusively with the X100F and its 23mm lens. If you want to learn seeing and framing, shoot with only one lens for a good long time. Your objective should be to fine tune your sight with the lens.

After some time, you will discover that you no longer need to look through the viewfinder to experiment and compose.

If you own many lenses and you are tempted to shoot with all of them, never go out with more than one lens. For example, if you want to shoot with the XF56mmF1.2, take it out and leave all the other lenses at home. Changing focal length during the street session disrupts your seeing quite drastically. Seeing is hard enough so don't add additional obstacles.



20 SHOOT GREAT IMAGERY AND OWN IT

I often see great photographs being squashed in between some mediocre work. The urge to share and show it all causes some photographers to publish 20-30 or more images from the same event. Don't do it. Make sure you share only your best work. In this way, you not only show respect for your viewer but also for the craft of seeing.

There is no question that it is hard to pick one great image, especially if we had a great field day. However, it is our role as a photographer to choose what we share. Choosing should not be outsourced to your audience otherwise you will start shooting and sharing not your vision and passion but what others like. It is a trap you don't want to fall into. Shoot great imagery, be proud of it and own it.



BONUS: HOW WAS IT SHOT?

THE MECHANICS OF SEEING: A VIOLINIST

The 'Violinist' image was taken during a private street photography workshop in Barcelona. My student and I were walking along tiny alleys of Barcelona in search of intriguing visuals. At one point, we entered a small public square that had a corner restaurant with most guests sitting outside. This corner was busy with people enjoying their food, the sunny weather and the music.

Usually when we walk into such tight spaces we are mostly observing the light and how it interacts with the street. However, what caught my eye this time was the violinist. I immediately knew he would be my subject.

Deciding on your subject early on in the process of creating an image is one of the most important decisions you can make. Not only does it provide you with a starting point in terms of context and mood but it also helps you in the process of elimination. Just keep this in mind: everything that fails to complement your subject in a contextual or design sense must be eliminated.



As we entered the square, on our left we saw the violinist facing a group of people in the restaurant. My first idea was to capture the violinist from behind with his audience in the background. As I looked into my viewfinder, I immediately abandoned this idea for two reasons. Firstly, the visuals seemed to be sterile and conventional. Secondly, the light was hitting the violinist and the crowd, so there was no clean separation of my subject, nor was there any mystery.

Then I walked around and took the perspective of the audience (people sitting at the restaurant). Right away three things grabbed my attention: 1) the pocket of light hitting the building elevation behind my subject, 2) the beautiful, back-lit posture of the violinist, and 3) the pitch black areas (when underexposed) providing a clean space, allowing my subject to stand out.

At this point it was a matter of compositional fine-tuning. I wanted to position myself with the focus on the bright sidewalk. I had to decide where I wanted to place the transition point between highlights and shadows. Notice that I went for what we once called the impact zones (you may call it the rule of thirds if you wish). Since I settled on a mysterious mood early on, technical considerations were reduced to an aggressive underexposure. Since the sun was hitting my subject from behind, I wanted to make sure that his shape was clearly visible, but not his face.



One of the appeals of this image is its mystery. The viewer doesn't know whether the image was taken on a square that was busy or empty. Such visuals engage and force viewers to create their own narrative. The more questions your audience needs to answer, the more powerful the image appears (obviously, a certain balance between a mystery and a messy shot must be maintained). The viewer doesn't know if the man was standing alone on an empty street playing for himself or whether there was a big crowd watching him.

In sum, the earlier you notice and decide on your subject, the better. However, such an early decision shortens the process of CRAFTING THE IMAGE for many people as they take a snap and move on. It is a common mistake in street photography. CRAFTING THE IMAGE requires an enormous amount of visual engagement, an in-depth exploration of the scene in terms of elements and their interaction with the light, as well as intense experimentation.